

Tilburg University

Sociolinguistic restratification in the online-offline nexus:

Blommaert, Jan

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Blommaert, J. (2019). *Sociolinguistic restratification in the online-offline nexus: Trump's viral errors*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 234).

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 234

Sociolinguistic restratification in the online-offline nexus: Trump's viral errors

by

Jan Blommaert[©]

(Tilburg University)

j.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu

November 2019



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

Sociolinguistic restratification in the online-offline nexus:

Trump's viral errors

Jan Blommaert

Abstract

Sociolinguistic stratification – the fact that language diversity is turned into inequality through processes of normative judgment – has been central in the development of modern sociolinguistics and has kept researchers' attention for many decades. The online-offline nexus in which we have learned to live and organize our social lives in online as well as offline spaces, each carrying different normative standards, has become a lab for manifest sociolinguistic restratification. An analysis of Donald Trump's orthographic errors on Twitter, and how such errors went viral, shows how multiple audiences apply very different indexical vectors to the errors, each of them iconicizing a more general set of perceived social and political divisions. The outcome is a complex, polycentric sociolinguistic system, far less stable than that imagined in earlier sociolinguistics. This system requires renewed attention.

Introduction: a perennial agenda

The discipline we now call sociolinguistics has throughout the 20th century systematically maintained and elaborated two connected issues.¹ Note that 'sociolinguistics' as it is now called is an innovation of the 1960s, when scholars (mainly in the US) started using the label to distinguish themselves and their work from that of the Chomskyan paradigm in linguistics, and to emphasize continuity with an older paradigm incorporated in anthropology and exemplified in the tradition started by Franz Boas (Darnell 1998; Hymes 1992; Bauman & Briggs 2003). It is in this longer tradition that the two connected issues were given a definitive shape. The issues are:

- (i) the principled equality of all languages and
- (ii) (ii) their factual inequality.

Taken together, these issues define sociolinguistics as a discipline concerned with *diversity*, but in a particular way.

The first issue, unpacked, has to do with the observation that every language, when seen in its concrete social context, is 'perfect': its resources enable members of the community of usage to express all possible meanings and fulfill every social-communicative function. In Benjamin Lee Whorf's (1956) famous view, every language incorporates, expresses and shapes the worldview of

those who use it, and those so in its very structure (cf. also Silverstein 1979). The issue was clearly articulated in Boas' seminal Introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911, also Boas 1928) as well as in Sapir's groundbreaking *Language* (1921). It became the epistemological, moral and political point of departure as well as the battle cry of generations of sociolinguists, and it defined the *linguistic* scope of the new discipline.

The second issue defined the battlefield of sociolinguistics. Given the in-principle equality of all languages, how come so many languages are factually considered inferior to others? Why are speakers of so many languages oppressed and marginalized, why do we make distinctions between 'standard' and 'substandard' varieties, why do we consider dialects features of backwardness and remnants of a pre-modern past? Why do we attach stigma to some accents in a language and prestige to others – when both are *linguistically* equivalent? And why are such distinctions codified in language policies and cast in even more robustly policed language ideologies enabling and sanctioning discriminations in which linguistic differences are turned into sociolinguistic inequalities?

This second issue, certainly from the 1960s onwards, defined the *social* scope of sociolinguistics, and it can be summarized in one word: stratification. And there were precursors: 'salvage linguistics' – the study of languages threatened with extinction – emerged out of an awareness that such languages would disappear not because of their intrinsic inferiority compared to, say, English or Spanish, but because of the fact that increasing marginalization of the users of such languages would ultimately eliminate the languages. And such forms of marginalization often included a strong stigma – a perceived, ideological inferiority – for the languages and language varieties as well. They were not qualified as 'languages' but as 'dialects', 'speech', 'jargons', 'sabirs' or simply 'barbarian' and 'primitive' (cf. Fabian 1986a, 1986b). Certainly when these language were not accompanied by an identifiable writing system, they were considered to be expressions of the innate and therefore general inferiority of their users.

As soon as a branch of scholarship emerged carrying the label of sociolinguistics, both issues merged into an agenda, expressed and developed in the work of the leading scholars of the first generation of sociolinguists. Forms of sociolinguistic diversity, ranging from AAVE in the US (Labov 1970), native-American stories (Hymes 1983), 'nonnative' Englishes in the US and the UK (Gumperz 1982) or working class accents in the UK (Bernstein 1971) and minority-majority multilingualism (Fishman 1971) were shown to be the object of intense discrimination, notably in education (the focus of e.g. Labov 1970; Bernstein 1971; Hymes 1980). Such forms of discrimination had *social*, not linguistic causes, and their analysis as linguistic phenomena needed to be set in a *context* that was at once structurally formed as well as synchronically enacted, often with predictable outcomes due to the

pervasive and enduring influence of policies and language ideologies rationalizing (and rendering ‘natural’) the stratification of sociolinguistic regimes (cf. Kroskrity 2000; also Bourdieu 1991).

Increasing diversity, for instance due to globalization processes, appeared to merely increase and complicate sociolinguistic inequalities (cf. Blommaert 2005, 2008, 2010; Arnaut et al 2016).

This very quick run through a century of sociolinguistic history takes me to the point of departure for this contribution. While we must take stratification as the basic engine behind the dynamics of sociolinguistic systems, the actual forms of stratification have become somewhat less predictable due to what we call the online-offline nexus: the fact that large parts of the world’s population now organize and live their social lives online as well as offline, with both zones of social life, so to speak, being mutually influencing (cf. Blommaert 2018). Offline practices are profoundly influenced and altered by online infrastructures and vice versa, creating different sociolinguistic economies – patterns of resource distribution, general formats for conducting communicative actions and forming communities – and repertoires adjusted to such changed economies.

A simple example can suffice to illustrate the changes: emojis have become part of the everyday repertoires of visual design of many millions of language users across the world and (while not ‘belonging’ to any language in particular) have rapidly acquired specific, conventionalized communicative functions and effects. Philip Seargeant (2019) perceived this development as nothing short of an ‘emoji revolution’. Now, emojis are not part of most language learning curricula – their usage is often explicitly proscribed in language classes – and their usage is ‘chronotopic’, confined to particular and situated timespace arrangements such as scripted online interaction, advertisements and popular culture (Kroon & Swanenberg 2019; cf. also Blommaert 2015). But within such chronotopes, they are, if you wish, features of ‘standard’ language with a tremendous, transnational and translanguistic scope of usage and variant productivity (e.g., when the fully-formed smiley emoji ‘☺’ is not available, it can be realized by means of other typographic signs such as ‘:-)’).

Similar things can be observed with respect to hashtags – the ‘#’ sign – as well as with the global spread of the ‘@’ sign to denote time and place as well as addressees in a wide range of scripted messages. Both are widely used in complex functions, and such usages display strong degrees of normativity (Blommaert 2020). Observe that such signs do not remain online but can be transported to offline chronotopes as well. Hashtags, notably, are widely used in demonstration banners, posters and flyers as well as on clothing. Hashtags have become a near-global sign indexing ‘message’ in general. At a higher-scale level of communicative economies, we see how online social genres such as tweets or Instagram updates have become incorporated into domains of power and prestige – they have become firmly integrated into political campaigns, for instance, and now compete for

prominence with older genres such as the politician's public rally speech or the newspaper editor's op-ed article.

Restratification in the online-offline nexus

All of this means that the normative world in which sociolinguistic resources get their place and value allocated needs to be reconsidered. The expansion of the infrastructures for communication have inevitably gone hand in hand with an expansion of the 'centering institutions' described by Michael Silverstein (1998: 404; also 1996) as the real or imagined sources of normative authority for social-communicative conduct to which people orient while communicating, and through which their conduct is appraised and ratified (cf. also Agha 2007). The result is a *complex polycentric sociolinguistic system*, i.e. an unstable, dynamic and open one in which gaps and overlaps, conflicts, contradictions and nonlinear outcomes are the rule rather than the exception (cf. Blommaert 2016).

Of course, this statement, as soon as it is formulated, appears pedestrian, almost truistic. Perhaps sociolinguistic systems were always complex ones (as prefigured by e.g. Bakhtin and Voloshinov when they emphasized dialogism and heteroglossia), and perhaps the only virtue of the online-offline nexus is that it takes this simple given into the spotlight and makes it inevitable. But even so there is a moment to be captured, for this insight forces us towards another imagination of the major vectors and patterns of stratification and restratification – away from simple top-down models of imposed and carefully engineered hegemony (as in early studies on language policy and language planning, e.g. Eastman 1983), from stable binaries of majority and minority languages at societal level with linear effects of linguicide looming (e.g. Phillipson 1992) and from studies of forms of language mixing as aberrations of a supposedly homogeneously monoglot norm (e.g. Myers-Scotton 1993). Theoretically as well as empirically, we need to see the normative valuation of sociolinguistic resources and of the modes of communication they shape, as well as the stratifying outcomes of such valuations, as *sets of different effects* spread over and caused by *a range of actors* and involving *several very different types of activities*, some of them involving high degrees of agency and others low degrees, some of them obviously revolving around human decision-making while others involve algorithmic technologies in crucial aspects of the process. Simply calling all of this 'power' may be comforting shorthand, but does not do justice to what actually goes on. The question is really: *which specific forms of power* generate stratifications and restratifications in online-offline situations.

I shall try to answer this question by means of an extended case analysis. I can offer a spoiler at this point. We shall see that the online language of the powerless can be appropriated by the powerful precisely because it is transgressive and evokes strong moral condemnation from powerful groups, and that such curious reversals of conventional sociolinguistic stratifications can algorithmically be

turned into a partisan ‘majority’ norm in a fragmented public sphere. The case I have chosen involves the most powerful person on earth: the President of the United States of America. It involves English, the world’s most stratified language because it is the most globally distributed one. And it involves the sociolinguistic object most sensitive to normative judgment: orthography.

Trump on Twitter

There is a very strong cultural assumption in societies such as ours, in which the most powerful people are also the sociolinguistic elites: they are expected to command the most advanced and highly valued communicative resources. When they talk, they are fluent and eloquent in ‘standard’ varieties of the most prestigious languages; when they write they write elegant and elaborated texts in accordance to the strictest rules of grammar, genre and orthography. And in all of this we expect these people to be coherent, make sense and preferably sound intelligent. This assumption rests on robust sociological grounds, as the oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated: dominant groups in society are the guardians of norms in the field of culture as well as in the field of language, and when a variety of language is called ‘accentless’, we are actually facing the most prestigious accent – that of the elites (cf. Bourdieu 1987, 1991; Agha 2007). It is further undergirded by an army of professionals supporting the powerful in their communicative work – from speech writers to communication advisors and social media staff – and ensuring the best possible discursive products whenever one needs to talk or write.

There is no doubt that Donald Trump can draw on the services of an exceptionally large and exquisitely equipped army of such communication specialists. He could already do so before his election to the US presidency in 2016, and it is safe to assume that he could benefit from the services of the most outstanding members of the profession after he moved into the White House. Yet, since the very beginning of his electoral campaign, Trump’s discursive idiosyncrasies became the object of intense public discussion.

Of course, he had big shoes to fill as a communicator, being the successor to one of modern history’s most accomplished public orators, Barack Obama. But then, Trump was not the first US president to be targeted for public communication flaws. Obama succeeded George W. Bush, a president whose incoherence and inarticulateness in public speech had become the stuff of legends (see Silverstein 2003; Lempert & Silverstein 2012). Bush, with a Texas drawl, would fail to get the pronunciation of relatively simple words and names (such as ‘Europe’) right, he would produce incoherent ramblings in answers to reporters, would deliver contradictions in terms and so forth. Such communicative flaws were widely perceived to be deeply embarrassing for almost anyone associated with Bush, and as a sign of a character flaw called ‘questionable intelligence’ for Bush himself. But there still was the

army of communication professionals, able to prevent the unfiltered and unedited presidential ramblings from becoming US policy, and able to turn incoherent statements into coherent (or coherently explained) ones, to rationalize the president's inarticulateness as part of his 'message' as an 'average American' talking in a 'demotic' way. Trump was a lot worse.

Trump's general tenor of communication was, to put it mildly, strange. In public debates, he was offensive bordering on obscene, bluntly insulting opponents ('Crooked Hilary', 'the failing New York Times') while using extravagant hyperboles in self-description and self-qualification – 'great', 'the greatest', 'absolutely fabulous', 'beautiful', 'the best', 'the only one' and so forth – while displaying a cavalier attitude towards facts as well as some of the defects earlier identified with George W. Bush (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Comment on Trump's mispronunciation.

Trump's public speech performances quickly became a favorite topic for late night show hosts such as Trevor Noah and Steven Colbert, and Trump imitators make a decent amount of money dissecting his usage of self-coined terms such as 'bigly', 'stable genius' and so forth and by poking fun at his obvious but stubbornly repeated gaffes (e.g. claiming that hurricane Dorian would strike Alabama, or announcing a border wall between Mexico and Colorado).

But Trump did not just talk: he also wrote *a lot*, and did so on Twitter. Trump's campaign, as we know, was the first major algorithmic campaign in US history (Maly 2016), and Jordan Hollinger (2018) calls his victory the 'first Twitter-based presidency'. His usage of Twitter is what makes his presidency entirely exceptional: he systematically used his private Twitter account as the channel for his messages, even after becoming president. The official Twitter account of the US president (@POTUS) often merely retweets messages launched by Trump on @realDonaldTrump. These tweets, consequently, fully maintain the character of 'normal', 'authentic', undoctored and unfiltered tweets produced by an 'ordinary' Twitter user. Tweetbinder, an online repository on Trump's tweets, claims that the president sent out about 10 tweets per day since his election, amounting to many thousands of tweets throughout his term in office. The same source also asserts that Trump writes and sends his tweets himself without the assistance (or censorship) of a communications team.²

The most amazing aspect of Trump's usage of Twitter is the tension between his tenor as an 'ordinary' user of social media on the one hand, and the nature and content of his messages. Trump doesn't just lambasts his opponents or showcases his public success on Twitter, he also uses the medium to announce major (and often not otherwise announced or anticipated) policy decisions and initiatives – often causing confusion and *déconfiture* among his collaborators and political allies as well as drawing fierce criticism from his opponents. Twitter really is Trump's most prominent channel of communication.

I need to pause here and turn to the general structure of communication on Twitter. And I shall start from something which all of us have absorbed during our first year of language studies: Saussure's sender-receiver model of communication (Saussure 1960: 27). (See Figure 2)



Figure 2: Saussure's model of communication

We see two (male) humans, A and B; A produces an utterance originating in his brain and transmits it through his mouth to the ears of B, who processes it in his brain and responds to it. All of this is very well-known, but we should remind ourselves that this simply dyadic sender-receiver model is, to a large extent, still the default model for imagining communication at large, and thus serves as the backdrop for communication theorizing. With this in mind, let us turn to the main structure of communication on Twitter. (See figure 3)

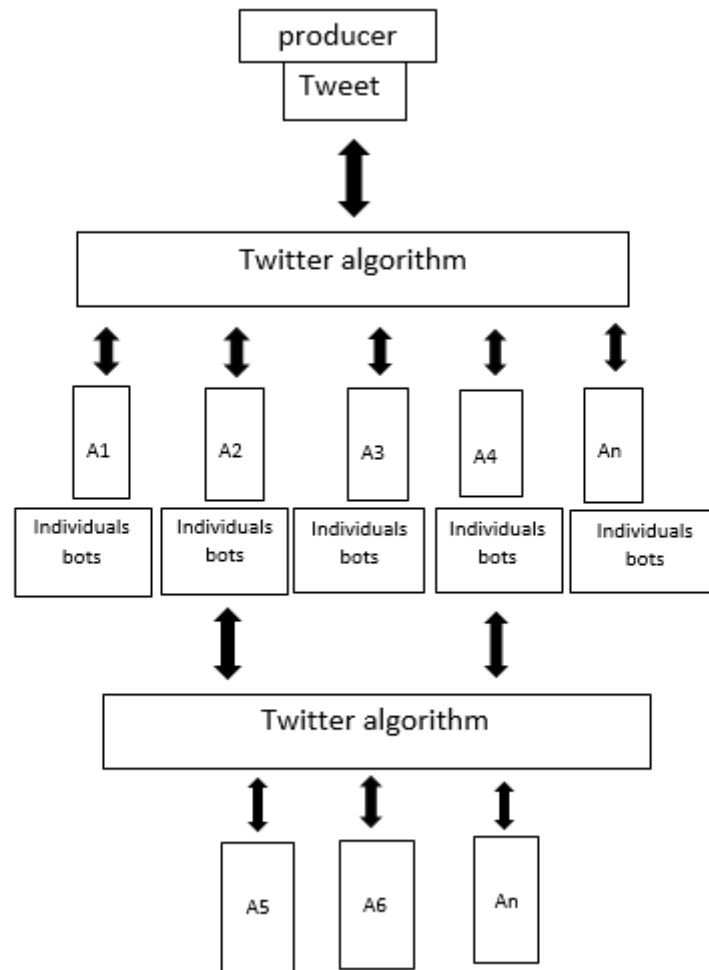


Figure 3: Communication structure on Twitter

We see a very different and much more complex structure of communication here. The tweet, produced by someone like Trump, is sent to an algorithm – a nonhuman ‘receiver’, if you wish – through which artificial intelligence operations forward it to numerous specific audiences (A 1, 2, ...n in figure 3), whose responses are fed back, as data, to the algorithm and thence to the sender of the tweet in nonstop sequences of interaction. Parts of these audiences can relay their own uptake of the tweet (via the Twitter algorithm) to secondary audiences (A 5, 6 ... n in the scheme), who can do the same – and so on, enabling a tweet to reach audiences not initially accessible. The audiences (also often called ‘bubbles’) are constructed out of users’ data yielding profiles, and they are selected on the basis of topic keywords, hashtags and histories of prior interactions.³ They consist of individuals, sure; but in the case of Trump and many other high-profile accounts also of bots – computer programs behaving like ‘normal’ Twitter users and generating specific forms of response such as liking and retweeting and sometimes dramatically increasing the volume of traffic for tweets.⁴

What we need to take along here is this:

- (a) There is no linear sender-response structure on Twitter, because the platform itself provides an algorithmic mediator for all and any interaction;
- (b) the participants are, consequently, not all human, as very crucial parts of the communication structure are controlled by automated AI technologies;
- (c) as an effect of these algorithmic mediations, there is not a single 'audience' (or 'public') in the structure of communication, but a fragmented complex of 'niched' audiences often with incompatible interests or political orientations;⁵
- (d) the entire system is permanently in motion, with constant interactional conversions of actions performed by (human and nonhuman) participants into data further shaping and regulating the effects of the actions (cf. Maly 2018).

We can now turn to Donald Trump's tweets again.

Trump's viral errors and sociolinguistic restratification

We saw how Trump's speech idiosyncrasies were targeted by critics; his tweets have been an even more outspoken object of language-normative criticism. Given the 'authentic' nature of Trump's tweets, peculiarities of writing habits can be noticed. One remarkable peculiarity is his unwarranted use of capitals – see 'Endless Wars' and 'Walls' in figure 4.



Figure 4: unwarranted capitals

The same ‘authentic’ nature of Trump’s tweets causes rather frequent typographic errors, and these are instantly singled out for condemnation. (See figure 5)

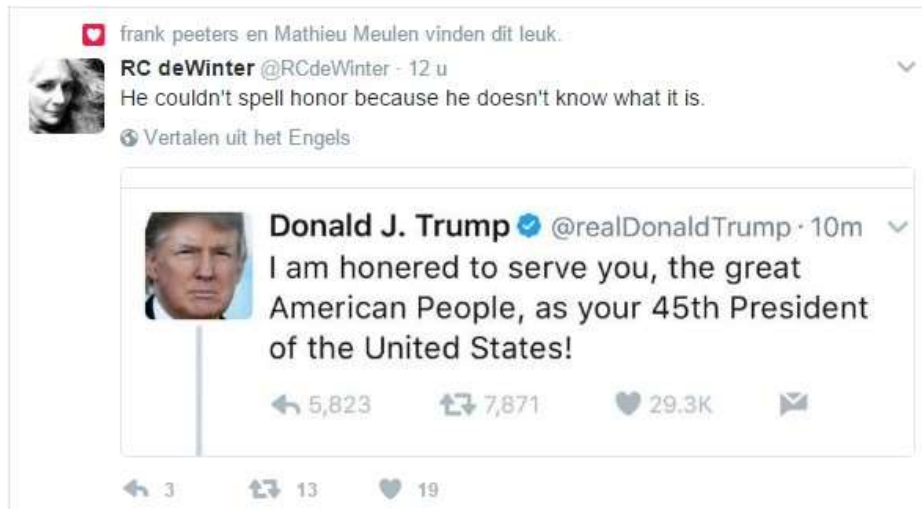


Figure 5: ‘honored’

We see indexicality in its purest form here: a typographic error leads to a *judgment of the entire person*: Trump doesn’t know what ‘honor’ is, hence he cannot write the word correctly. This form of sarcastic indexical interpretation is very frequent on Twitter. (See figure 6)



Figure 6: ‘passed, not past’

Those are moral condemnations of the person Donald Trump. But they are informed by something bigger: the strong cultural assumption mentioned earlier, in which we expect our social, cultural, intellectual and political elites to communicate in accordance with the most elevated standards of language – and in particular, of *literate* language (cf. Lillis 2013; Turner 2018). Thus, orthographic errors on Twitter are converted into judgments of *Trump as president* – since the president of the US is supposed to write correctly. (See figure 7)



Figure 7: 'unpresidented'

It is because Trump is president that the indexical correctness issue is applied to his writing with such vigor and intensity. Interestingly, in such exposures, Trump's Twitter literacy is generalized to include *all* of his literacy. Thus, when Trump wrote a widely publicized official letter to Turkey's president Erdogan in October 2019, the awkward wording of the letter was caricatured by online artist El Elegante as a sequence of emojis (figure 8).



Figure 8: El Elegante's caricature of Trump's letter

Twitter is the main forum for such critical exposure of Trump's typographical errors, but it is not the only one. Mainstream media comment on them, newspapers devote articles to them, and a wide

range of analysts examine them. Blogger-analyst Ginny Hogan (2018) provides a short, sarcastic summary of the problem:

“Unfortunately, the data set doesn’t include all deleted tweets, although I would be honored to learn how some of Trump’s interesting spelling choices affect tweet popularity. To bad there’s not a lot of press covfefe on that — it’s really an unpresidented phenomenon #Denmakr.”

The reference to ‘covfefe’ here is interesting, because it’s probably Trump’s most iconic Twitter error. Trump posted it in May 2017, and the nonsense word is probably a botched attempt to write the term ‘coverage’ (see figure 9).



Figure 9: ‘covfefe’

The word became an instant hit among critics on Twitter and beyond, the more since the White House Press Secretary tried to explain it as meaningful: "I think the president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant", Sean Spicer announced.⁶ ‘Covfefe’ became the stuff of memes and went viral in a wild stampede of (often hilarious) critical uptake.

So far so good: we see how orthographic errors by Donald Trump lead to relatively predictable – standard – indexical interpretations as transgressive and inadmissible features of communicative conduct displayed by the president of the United States. We can observe the dominant sociolinguistic stratification at work here: such errors in writing are wrong, certainly when performed by members of the elites, and they index moral disqualification of the person and question his membership of those elites. Someone who commits such errors should never be president of the US, is the line of interpretation we have observed so far. And this would be the end of the story in Saussure’s communication model: B (the audience) has disqualified what A (Trump) tried to communicate. But as we have seen, communication on Twitter is different.

Let us have a look at the people who posted the critical comments on Trump's errors. All of them are public figures: Noga Tarnopolsky is a journalist, RC de Winter is a poet and digital artist, El Elegante is a digital artist, Randy Mayem Singer is a successful movie and TV series screenwriter, and J.K. Rowling is of course the author of the *Harry Potter* blockbusters. All of them are intellectuals and artists working with language, and in the worldview of Donald Trump and his supporters, they belong to the ('liberal') cultural 'elites'. Within those 'elites' they form a subgroup notoriously critical of Trump and his politics, and Trump himself takes shots at such liberal intellectual and artist elite figures quite often on his Twitter account. (See figure 10)



Figure 10: Meryl Streep is over-rated.

These intellectual and artistic elites clearly form one (or several) of the niche audiences on Trump's Twitter account – a hostile one. And they can be described, by the Trump camp, as the elites whom Trump wants to defy and defeat, for they are in opposition to 'the people'. Many actors in Trump's universe are 'a threat/enemy to the people' – mainstream media are, for instance, quite systematically qualified as such.⁷ Ridiculing Trump's orthographic errors (or speech habits) can thus be represented as a predictable and stale anti-Trump reaction coming from one of the elite social groups he targets as opposed to the interests of 'ordinary Americans'.

This is the point where we get sociolinguistic restratification. Trump's orthographic errors are (very much like George W. Bushes discursive inarticulateness) indexically upgraded from 'bad in the eyes of the elites' to 'good in the eyes of the people' – they become indexically restratified as the *demotic code* that iconizes the down-to-earthness of ordinary Americans. And this restratified sign goes viral among the other and more supportive audiences of his Twitter account. In figure 11, we see how a Trump supporter uses #covfeve (followed by two positive emojis) as an emblem of pride used against Trump critics. The meaning attributed to the word here is grounded in the interpretation of Trump's initial 'covfeve' tweet, which attacked mainstream media. This intertext provides the function of the

word here: covfeve has become (like 'MAGA') a term that can be used to talk back to Trump's detractors.



Figure 11: pro-Trump Twitter account.

The term 'covfeve' was also adopted by a score of Twitter users in their user names. (see figure 12)



Figure 12: 'covfeve' accounts

Some of these accounts are obviously held by people who are critical of Trump, while others are held by Trump supporters. The indexical vectors of the term are opposites: for pro-Trump people,

‘covfeve’ indexes support for Trump and hostility towards his elite critics; for anti-Trump people, it indexes the fact that Trump is unfit for the presidency. And both indexical vectors are attached to an orthographic error made on a public forum such as Twitter. ‘Covfeve’ became a viral error, circulated within very different audiences and with very different meanings.

A lab of restratification

Let me summarize the case. Trump’s orthographic errors on Twitter got immense traction on Twitter (and beyond) and did so within very different audiences, some of whom applied the ‘standard’ sociolinguistic stratification in which orthographic correctness is mandatory for people at the top of the social ladder. Other audiences used an entirely different, ‘demotic’ understanding of these errors, presented there as emblematic of someone intent on defending the interests of ‘ordinary’ Americans. The virality of errors such as ‘covfeve’ implies at least two entirely opposite indexical vectors, one of which restratifies the conventions of the sociolinguistic domain of writing from elite-dominant to demotic-dominant.

There is, of course, irony in the fact that Donald Trump (like George W. Bush before him) can be presented at all as a non-elite, ‘ordinary’ person. He is a scion of a very wealthy family and proudly proclaims his wealth to all who want to listen, he was a mass media superstar, a bestselling author and an alumnus of the University of Pennsylvania’s prestigious Wharton School, and he is of course the president of the United States. From what is publicly known about his lifestyle, he really doesn’t live like ‘ordinary’ Americans.

His communication styles, however, offer the potential to turn this obvious misfit into a perfect fit: sarcasm about his speaking and writing errors can be presented as ‘elitist’ and magnified – generalized – as part of a pattern of elite domination of ‘ordinary’ Americans, the kind of elite domination Trump promised to abolish as president. In the process, the sociolinguistic norms of different audiences are played off against each other in Twitter discussions. It is on Twitter that the fragmented nature of audiences affords us a glimpse of the fragmentation of sociolinguistic stratification, with ‘standard’ (i.e. ‘elite’) norms competing with demotic ones. Within the latter, errors are not just normal or acceptable, they are *prestigious* and emblematic, as we could see in figure 11. The errors are there for a good reason: they iconicize the perceived ‘big’ divisions in US society and the perceived exclusion of ‘ordinary’ people from major public debates. Trump’s errors are icons of the *voice* of such ‘ordinary’ people.

We see a complex, polycentric sociolinguistic system here, in which specific norms can dominate specific segments of the public domain while they are being fundamentally challenged in other

segments. Social media such as Twitter make this polycentricity and its restratifying features abundantly clear: they are a veritable lab for examining sociolinguistic normativity, debates and contests about normativity, and innovations in that field (cf. Blommaert 2018; Seargeant 2019).

For sociolinguistics as a science, this means that the supposed stability of stratified sociolinguistic systems – with minorities and majorities clearly demarcated by lines of objective power – needs to be critically revisited, empirically as well as theoretically. In the online-offline nexus, heteronormativity is not an exception, but a rule among segments of the users' communities. These segments now have acquired public channels of communication, making previously invisible and disqualified demotic forms of language and literacy available for uptake, and turning them into prestige-carrying varieties demanding respect and public recognition. This new politics of language is expertly used by politicians such as Trump as well as by other powerful political and economic actors: the play of stratification and restratification is at the heart of several very large processes of social change, and requires a sociolinguistic analysis that does justice to its complexity.

Notes

1. I am dedicating this essay to my friend and colleague Sjaak Kroon, with whom I collaborated intensely for over a decade and with whom I discussed almost any idea that came into being during that time. I tailored the essay in such a way that it addresses several of Sjaak's interests, overlapping with mine. I am grateful to Ico Maly for critical comments and suggestions on an earlier version of the paper.
2. See <https://www.tweetbinder.com/blog/trump-twitter/>. On the Trump Twitter Archive, an almost comprehensive collection of Trump's tweets can be found. See <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>. As for Tweetbinder's claim that Trump is the sole author of his tweets: I afford myself some doubt. Surely, he is the author of a huge number of tweets, but there are stylistic differences between his tweets (a full analysis of which is reserved for another paper) that point towards more hands touching his Twitter keyboard.
3. Hogan (2018) provides some insights into the traction profile of Trump's Twitter account. We should remember that there is another, human filter on what is being shown on social media such as Facebook and Twitter: the platform guidelines and restrictions on content, prohibiting, for instance, explicit sexual content, hate speech or violent images to be publicly visible, and policed by (often subcontracted) individuals. The criteria applied, along with the practices, outcomes and labor conditions in this domain are the object of constant controversy. See Varis (2018) for a discussion.

4. In late October 2019, Donald Trump's Twitter account boasted over 66 million followers. But the @realDonaldTrump account has been shown to contain an unusually large number of bots among its followers. See <https://sparktoro.com/blog/we-analyzed-every-twitter-account-following-donald-trump-61-are-bots-spam-inactive-or-propaganda/>. For the effects of bots on the intensity of Trump's Twitter traffic, see <https://www.axios.com/most-shared-links-debate-pro-trump-tweets-bots-e9dcd5e1-0356-4fc8-9408-f1d474aac2d7.html>.
5. To clarify the heterogeneity of Trump's audiences: given the sheer importance of his tweets as political statements and announcements, his Twitter community is not necessarily made up of 'followers' in the sense of people who agree with or support Mr. Trump. Reporters and opponents are also compelled to follow his account in order to stay abreast of what the president has in mind.
6. For a retrospective report, see <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/05/31/covfefe-one-year-anniversary-donald-trumps-confusing-tweet/659414002/>
7. For a recent critical review of Trump's 'enemy of the people' argument, see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/07/donald-trump-war-on-the-media-oppo-research>

References

- Agha, Asif (2007) *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Arnaut, Karel, Jan Blommaert, Ben Rampton & Massimiliano Spotti (eds) (2016) *Language and Superdiversity*. New York: Routledge
- Bauman, Richard & Charles Briggs (2003) *Language and Modernity: Language ideologies and the politics of inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernstein, Basil (1971) *Class, Codes and Control, Vol 1: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Blommaert, Jan (2005) *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Blommaert, Jan (2008) *Grassroots Literacy: Writing, identity and voice in Central Africa*. London: Routledge
- Blommaert, Jan (2010) *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- Blommaert, Jan (2015) Chronotopes, scales and complexity in the study of language in society. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44: 105-116
- Blommaert, Jan (2016) From mobility to complexity in sociolinguistic theory and method. In Nikolas Coupland (ed.) *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates*: 242-259. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan (2018) *Durkheim and the Internet: On Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Blommaert, Jan (2020) Formatting online actions: #justsaying on Twitter. In Jerry Won Lee & Sender Dovchin (eds.) *Translinguistics: Negotiating innovation and ordinariness*: 75-89. London: Routledge
- Boas, Franz (1911) Introduction. *Handbook of American Indian Languages, Vol. 1*: 1-83. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 40. Washington: Government Print Office (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology).
- Boas, Franz (1928) *Anthropology and Modern Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1987) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity
- Darnell, Regna (1998) *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and revolution in American anthropology*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Eastman, Carol (1983) *Language Planning: An Introduction*. San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp
- Fabian, Johannes (1986a) *Language on the Road: Notes on Swahili in two Nineteenth-Century travelogues*. Hamburg: Buske Verlag.
- Fabian, Johannes (1986b) *Language and Colonial Power: The appropriation of Swahili in the former Belgian Congo 1880-1938*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fishman, Joshua (1971) *Bilingualism in the Barrio*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gumperz, John (1982) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hogan, Ginny (2018) Twitter advice for President Trump: A statistical adventure. Blogpost, <https://medium.com/little-old-lady-comedy/twitter-advice-for-president-trump-a-statistical-adventure-38fc23dd5d38>

- Hollinger, Jordan (2018) Trump, social media, and the first Twitter-based presidency. *Diggit Magazine* 7 May 2018. <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/Trump-Twitter-Based-Presidency>
- Hymes, Dell (1980) *Language in Education: Ethnolinguistic essays*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Hymes, Dell (1983) *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Hymes, Dell (1992) The concept of communicative competence revisited. In Martin Pütz (ed.) *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution*: 31-57. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Hymes, Dell (1996) *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Kroon, Sjaak & Jos Swanenberg (eds.) (2019) *Chronotopic Identity Work: Sociolinguistic Analyses of Cultural and Linguistic Phenomena in Time and Space*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Kroskrity, Paul (ed.) (2000) *Regimes of Language*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.
- Labov, William (1970) The logic of nonstandard English. In Frederick Williams (ed.) *Language and Poverty: Perspectives on a theme*: 153-189. New York: Academic Press
- Lempert, Michael & Michael Silverstein (2012) *Creatures of Politics: Media, message, and the American Presidency*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lillis, Theresa (2013) *The Sociolinguistics of Writing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Maly, Ico (2016) How did Trump get this far? *Diggit Magazine* 17 October 2016. <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/how-did-trump-get-far>
- Maly, Ico (2018) Algorithmic populism and algorithmic activism. *Diggit Magazine* 8 November 2018. <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/algorithmic-populism-activism>
- Myers-Scotton, Carol (1993) *Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Phillipson, Robert b(1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sapir, Edward (1921) *Language*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1960) *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (eds. Charles Bally & Albert Sechehaye). Paris: Payot.

Silverstein, Michael (1979) (1979) Language structure and linguistic ideology. In Peter Clyne, William Hanks & Carol Hofbauer (eds.) *The Elements: A Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels*: 193-247. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.

Silverstein, Michael (1996) Monoglot 'standard' in America: standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony. In Don Brenneis & Ronald Macaulay (eds.) *The matrix of language: Contemporary linguistic anthropology*: 284-306. Boulder: Westview Press.

Silverstein, Michael (1998) Contemporary transformations of local linguistic communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 401-426.

Silverstein, Michael (2003) *Talking Politics: The substance of style from Abe to 'W'*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Seargeant, Philip (2019) *The Emoji Revolution: How technology is shaping the future of communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Turner, Joan (2018) *On Writtenness: The cultural politics of academic writing*. London: Bloomsbury.

Varis, Piia (2018) Labouring in the digital economy: The people making content (in)visible online. *DiggIt Magazine* 1 November 2018. <https://www.diggitmazine.com/column/labouring-digital-economy>

Whorf, Benjamin Lee (1956) *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings by Benjamin Lee Whorf* (ed. John B. Carroll). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.